George Jury to Be Empaneled Today

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U.S. Distrct Judge Royce Lamberth said yesterday that he will empanel a jury today in the Iran-contra trial of Clair E. George, former director of the CIA clandestine service.

Opening arguments and testimony from prosecution witnesses in the trial of the highest-ranking CIA official caught up in the Iran-contra scandal is to begin Friday, the judge said.

Lamberth announced the schedule after a closed-door session to consider George's request for declassification of portions of two boxes of CIA operational files that Iran-contra prosecutors belatedly discovered at agency headquarters earlier this month.

The documents in the boxes, which totaled 2,000 pages, were copies, not originals, according to a source familiar with the contents. All but one of the documents had been made available earlier by the CIA to the prosecutors, the source said. The one that had not been delivered was considered by independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh's office to be relevant to the George trial.

One group of documents contained in the boxes "involved Iraq and not Iran," according to the source, but he gave no further description of the papers.

The boxes were found earlier this month "squirreled away" beneath the desk of the official custodian of records for the CIA's clandestine directorate who had just undergone questioning by Iran-contra prosecutors, the prosecutors told Lamberth Tuesday. The material was turned over to George and his lawyers Sunday morning for their review. George's attorneys said yesterday they were hoping to use "a couple of hundred pages" in his defense.

George, CIA's deputy director for operations from 1984 to 1987, faces trial on nine counts of perjury, false statements and obstruction of congressional and grand jury inquiries into the Iran-contra affair. He has been planning to use what has been described in court papers as a "preoccupation defense," arguing that he was too busy with the myriad activities of his worldwide directorate to be held to account for not answering questions on the details of the complex Iran-contra scandal.

Lamberth said he would swear in a panel of 12 jurors and six alternates today and then conclude the closed-door hearings on George's request for declassification of documents from the newly discovered boxes this afternoon.

Because Lamberth has been permitting the government to substitute bland language for sensitive details contained in many of the documents, there seems little likelihood that the trial will collapse over classified materials. An earlier prosecution of former-CIA officer Joseph Fernandez was dropped when the intelligence agency refused to declassify materials that the court ruled the defense needed.